Conversion stories, which in their nature are individual stories, do at the same time contain common references to historic socio-cultural identities as well as to the new reference point for religious identity. Drawing on an ethnography of conversion to an Islamized form of Christianity among a number of Bangladeshi men and women, this essay argues that in Bangladesh conversions to Christianity among the so-called Īsā īmāndārs, “those who are faithful to Jesus,” are best understood as contextual reconstructions of religious identity. Taking their cue from īmān, “faith,” and emphasizing the dimension of faithfulness, their religious life epitomizes an Islamic religious virtue but focuses on Jesus as Christ. In the syncretistic process, continuities and discontinuities with Christianity and Islam are negotiated by the use of several types of interreligious hermeneutics.1

Milad-e-Īsā Worship at Mehrab’s

On Friday afternoons, Mehrab, a middle-aged man originally from the Chittagong area, placed a small signboard at the main entrance of the alley where he lives in Mirpur, Dhaka. The signboard said “Jamāʾat” and functioned as a discrete invitation to attend the jamāʾat, “fellowship,” which thus was announced to take place inside. As the last rays of the hot

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1 The material for this essay consists of data gathered by participant observation and personal interviews with 35 men and 8 women from a Muslim background. The fieldwork was carried out in October–December 2002 and January–October 2004 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In this essay, all quoted material deriving from these interviews dates to one of these two periods. The first part of the fieldwork was made possible financially by the Areopagos Foundation, and the second part by grants from the Danish National Council for Humanities, the Julie von Müllens Stiftelse, and the Sigurd Andersen og Hustrus Stiftelse. A more thorough presentation is published in Jonas Adelin Jørgensen, Jesus Īmāndārs and Christ Bhaktas: Two Case Studies of Interreligious Hermeneutics and Identity in Global Christianity (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008).
Bangladeshi sun disappeared behind the houses across the small street, the īmāndārs, “the faithful ones,” started to arrive one by one. Inside Mehrab’s house, up a steep staircase, his small office had been converted into a meeting place. All office furniture except for Mehrab’s solid wooden writing table had been emptied from the room and straw mats now covered the concrete floor. A single fluorescent light illuminated the blue walls and a fan worked noisily to drive away the mosquitoes. While waiting for Mehrab to begin speaking, the few īmāndārs who had gathered spoke quietly together. A few minutes after five o’clock, Mehrab’s two daughters, who also attended the jamāʾat, gave everyone a copy of the Kitābul Mugaldeś—a translation of the Bible into Musalmānī Baṁglā, the national language of Bangladesh—and a homemade collection of Īsāi-songs, “Jesus-songs.” Both books were placed in small wooden bookstands in front of each īmāndār.

When five or six īmāndārs had gathered, Mehrab welcomed everyone by announcing a song as a milad-e-Īsā, “in remembrance of Jesus.” These songs were a mix of translations of well-known Christian songs from British hymnology and a number of local compositions. The local compositions deserve special attention, as several of them drew heavily on an indigenous style of music known as baul or baul gān, “folk songs,” which use religious metaphors and depict the singer as a devout seeker of God. When I first participated in Mehrab’s jamāʾat in January, 2004, Mehrab preached on a text from the book of Hebrews. Another participating īmāndār had recited a number of verses from Hebrews 4 and 5, a passage which interprets Jesus Christ as a high priest for those who believe him. In his sermon, Mehrab announced that “peace and holiness” was the main motif of the text. He argued that “unless one becomes holy, it is not possible to see the Lord.” The īmāndār therefore has to become holy, he continued. All human religions emphasize holiness, he argued. Both Islam and Hinduism acknowledge that without holiness it is not possible to see or stand before God. But in contrast to Hinduism and Islam, both of which, in various ways, according to Mehrab’s sermon, depend upon the sacrifice by believers, the īmāndār knows that true holiness only comes from the blood of Jesus. Therefore, he summed up, inner faith, or the faithfulness of the īmāndār toward Jesus rather than toward the “exterior” blood of sacrificial animals is essential. Sermons were followed by a period of intercessory prayer. Occasionally, the prayers would go on for half an hour or so, although they were usually shorter. From time to time, members of the jamāʾat celebrated the Eucharist. The ritual was simple and stripped of pomp and circumstance; Mehrab simply read the verses from 1 Corinthians 11 and then distributed bread and fruit juice among